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RUEHKB/AMEMBASSY BAKU 0019
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SUBJECT: TURKEY: KURDISH PROTESTS ERUPT TO MARK DATE OF OCALAN'S
ARREST; MORE TO FOLLOW?

Summary

1. (SBU) PKK supporters came out in the thousands to mark the 10th anniversary of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan's capture. Defying a ban on pro-Ocalan demonstrations, protesters gathered at the headquarters of the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) in several southeastern cities. In the ensuing clashes, over 70 (including 20 policemen) were injured and approximately 180 people were arrested. The active participation by DTP officials in the protests shows the enduring grip of Ocalan on Kurdish politics. The violence is probably a precursor to several weeks of tension preceding the Turkish local elections March 29. While DTP's uneducated base may get fired up by confrontations with the police, middle-class residents of cities such as Diyarbakir and Van are increasingly turned off by such destructive theatrics. End summary.

Ocalan Still a Magnet for Protest

2. (SBU) PKK supporters staged several illegal demonstrations throughout southeastern Turkey February 14-15 to mark the anniversary of Abdullah Ocalan's 1999 arrest in Kenya by Turkish authorities. Pro-PKK Kurds still regard the imprisoned Ocalan as their leader; the DTP leader in Siirt province told reporters that the date of his capture is a "dark day for the Middle Eastern peoples."

3. (SBU) The largest protest took place in Diyarbakir, where a crowd of 5,000 gathered at DTP headquarters. Violence erupted after the police refused to allow DTP mayor Osman Baydemir to make a statement on the grounds that those gathered had not been granted permission to do so. In the ensuing clashes, police used water cannons and tear gas to break up the gathering. A local journalist told us that Baydemir made good-faith efforts to reach an accommodation with the authorities to allow the demonstration to proceed with minimal disruption on traffic or the surrounding community. The authorities, however, insisted that the demonstration be cancelled completely. The DTP is calling for "silent marches" on February 18 to protest the "disproportionate force" used by police over the weekend.

4. (SBU) On a smaller scale, similar incidents took place in Batman, Siirt, Hakari, Urfa, Mardin, and Van as well as in migrant-heavy cities farther west, including Mersin and Adana. Nationwide, approximately 180 people have been arrested so far. Throughout the Southeast, merchants kept their shops shuttered on the 15th to avoid damage. (PKK supporters typically call for shop closures in "solidarity" with their cause; those who stay

open risk retaliation.)

15. (SBU) According to the liberal daily, Taraf, police in Diyarbakir are also detaining children with scarred hands on the assumption that they were involved in stone-throwing. In recent months prosecutors have been unusually harsh in punishing youngsters accused of pro-PKK rioting. In Adana, 19 teenagers are facing prison sentences averaging 25 years for throwing stones at police during pro-Ocalan protests last year. According to Taraf, a total of 737 children faced charges for participation in illegal protests and similar crimes in 2006-07.

Harbinger of Stormy March?

16. (SBU) The February 15 protests are likely the first installment in a game of street politics that will continue in the Southeast through the Nevruz celebrations and the local elections, on March 21 and 29, respectively. According to contacts in the region, the DTP will try to generate situations which provoke the police to overreact, creating the perception that the state (and by extension the ruling AKP) is harming innocent Kurds who merely want their voices heard and their human rights respected. The DTP calculates that such scenes will reinforce Turkish-Kurdish fault lines and persuade more Kurds to support their party. The risk, however, is that pro-PKK militants overstep the line and are seen as responsible for causing disorder, as happened during PM Erdogan's visit to Van in January. If the PKK and DTP are blamed, then the AKP benefits, particularly in cities such as Diyarbakir, which have a growing middle class interested in stability and impatient with the PKK's radicalism.

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